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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000017

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION, ENTREPRENEURS STAND TOGETHER FOR
IMPORTANT PROTESTS

REF: A. MINSK 013

[1](#)B. 06 MINSK 754

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On January 10, between 1,500-2,000 demonstrators gathered on Minsk's October Square to protest new regulations driving small entrepreneurs out of business. At one point the protestors blocked off traffic at a main intersection. Authorities began their crackdown before the demonstration, and arrested a further 27 persons during and after the event, with some of those arrested receiving substantial injuries. Actions to disrupt independent websites at the time of the protest underline the GOB's concern. End summary.

Largest Action on Square Since March 2006 Protest

[1](#)2. (C) A demonstration on October Square on January 10 -- the largest there since March 2006 -- in protest of Presidential Order 760 (ref A) drew 1,500-2,000 participants despite a stiff wind and snow. A sizable majority of participants appeared to be small business owners, although pro-democracy activists were notable as well. With much of the square taken up by a public skating rink, demonstrators congregated near Minsk's main north-south thoroughfare, Independence Prospect. Banners of the United Civic Party (UCP), the UCP youth movement and the "For Freedom" movement, as well as traditional Belarusian flags appeared. Charge and Poloffs observed for nearly two hours accompanied by a colleague from the Japanese Embassy; the EU was minimally represented by the British Charge and a "drive-by" by the Slovak Charge. Government officials refused to meet protestors on the square, but Inna Medvedeva, Head of the Presidential Administration's Economics Department, received a group of five leaders, including P
erspektiva NGO Chair Anatoliy Shumchenko.

[1](#)3. (C) After Medvedeva told the five that she did not have authority to meet any demands, protestors marched down Independence Prospect to Independence Square in front of parliament. Protestors overflowed into the street, blocking traffic in both directions for at least ten minutes, during which youths with nationalist white-red-white flags climbed buses, according to participant Lyudmila Gryaznova. The protestors demanded a meeting with Prime Minister Sergey Sidorskiy, but were refused. Many of the demonstrators then returned to October Square. About 20 youths were arrested when they attempted to block traffic.

[1](#)4. (C) Once back at October Square, the protestors called

for another demonstration on January 21 at 7:00 p.m. Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Deputy Head Aleksey Yanukevich told Acting Pol/Econ Chief the late hour might not draw maximum public attention, but admitted it could allow sympathetic students to join in without fear of suspension for missing class.

GOB Reaction: Hidden Repression Belies Public Restraint

15. (C) Perhaps fearing the backlash from a public show of force in Minsk's central square, authorities chose not to cordon off October Square before the demonstration. While numerous plainclothes security forces mingled with participants, traffic cops were the only uniformed presence on the square. They and a row of uniformed Interior Ministry SpetsNaz troops across the street deterred a move toward Lukashenko's office. Over a dozen buses, three paddy wagons and ten police cars waited behind the square.

16. (C) At least three independent websites were unavailable throughout the time of the demonstration. The administrator for Charter97's website, Nataliya Radina, said that internet users could access her site only at 6:30 p.m. State media were out in force, interviewing Charge during the demonstration and asking for interviews from several civil society activists entering his residence for a representational event that evening.

17. (C) Altogether at least 27 activists face charges after the protest. One youth activist and a reporter for "Nasha Niva" newspaper were injured significantly enough during their arrest that their trials have been postponed. Shumchenko and UCP Chair Anatoliy Lebedko were sentenced to

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15 days in jail. Charge visited both courthouses where trials were scheduled to take place in order to talk to supporters. Numerous activists were harassed before the event and the Embassy issued a statement condemning the arrests. Minsk activist Vyacheslav Sivchik was sentenced to 10 days in jail for alleged petty hooliganism. Oleg Shabetnik of Rechitsa was sentenced to five days in jail and fined 700,000 BYR (USD 328) for allegedly cursing in public. According to press accounts, police told Viktor Gorbachev (ref tel) he would be arrested if he left his apartment. Officers were stationed outside his building and his telephone line was cut off. Malady Front activist Kasya Galitskaya said Ivan Shylo (ref B) and others from Soligorsk were arrested when they arrived in Minsk.

18. (U) Media reported that authorities posted notices at many markets that a January 10 inspection would check whether stalls were closed without advanced permission. The rental contracts of those found in violation would then be subject to cancellation.

Comment: More than the Usual Suspects

19. (C) Representatives of rival entrepreneur groups and opposition political and civil society activists came together for the largest mid-winter demonstration in Minsk in some time. The arrests and the physical mistreatment of some of those arrested show a combination of fear and reticence on the part of the regime. Though it may have wanted to avoid a violent public crackdown against a previously apolitical group like the entrepreneurs, fear of such public demonstrations of dissent led to arrests and beatings. Opposition leaders Charge spoke to at the trials on January 11 -- including BPF First Deputy Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka and BSDP(G) Acting Chair Anatoliy Levkovich -- commented enthusiastically on the involvement of entrepreneurs with political activists. The regime will undoubtedly try to spin January 10 events as just another street action by opposition politicians and students, but another strong turnout by

entrepreneurs January 21 would dispel such talk, and might
just move the entrepreneurs ev
en closer toward enhanced participation in the opposition.
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